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**Outer Space as an Issue Public: A
Comparative Analysis of The United
States and Romania**

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**CENTER FOR
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Abstract

The political theory of an issue public correlates broad democratic engagement to a voting behavior tightly linked to single issue decision-making. In the American political context, issue publics such as abortion or gun rights become entrenched single issue political positions that can significantly affect voting patterns and legislation. A primary theory advanced by Carmines and Stimson (1986) is that issue publics are contingent upon elite acceptance and advocacy of the issue. This research study tests the theory of Carmines and Stimson by examining the seeming absence of an issue public in Romania and comparing it to the emergence of a similar issue public in the United States in the 1960s: outer space. Given the peculiar dynamic of Romanian outer space politics, Romania represents a unique case: a persistent interest in Outer Space as manifest through its history, respective agencies and commercial enterprises, and a persistent absence of it as an issue public. This study attempts to understand both the dynamics of this gap and postulate why it occurs by looking comparatively at the specific case of the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Keywords

voting patterns, outer space, democratic engagement

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Introduction

According to Henderson (2014) an issue public represents a voter segment 'with a personal commitment to specific policy'. The construct of the issue public is specific and distinct from that of a voter bloc or demographic. A voter bloc represents a demographic or socially delineated group that tends to display similar voting behavior. An issue public, however, is distinct: it is a body that is not necessarily conscious of itself that engages in political behavior (such as voting) only with respect to a certain issue. An 'Issue Public' represents a political issue within a society that has received enough resources and attention to rise the level of national awareness and competition among political parties for positioning and power within that issue. In addition, it must also be significant enough to represent a reason for engaging in political behavior and making political decisions. (I voted for candidate X, because candidate X and I share the same view on issue Z.)

The question of how issue publics evolve, and why certain issues become issue publics and others do not is one that has been extensively explored within the field of political science. Carmines and Stimson (1986) developed and provide significant evidence for a theory of issue public evolution that is contingent on changes in elite behavior. Specifically, they sought to develop a model of issue evolution by focusing on two central problems: the structure of the evolution and the sequence of changes in elite behavior. The analysis of issue evolution centers around what the authors call the 'critical moment'. This 'critical moment' occurs after an elite polarization. In other words, party elites must first frame the issue in a partisan construct that then enables an elite polarization to occur. Once this occurs, the issue, after a delay, reaches the mass electorate.

Upon reaching the mass electorate it either becomes or does not become a major political issue of its time and place. Carmines and Stimson (1986) trace the example of racial desegregation and provide further insight into this relationship between elite framing of issues and the emergence of those issues within the mass electorate. They look at the dynamic of issue sequencing and its effect on issue evolution. They theorize that, although elites lead, they neither explicitly control nor manipulate issues. Issue evolution, in their eyes, produces representation as a by product. In other words, while issue publics are contingent on changes in elite behavior, elites may not necessarily have control of issue publics once they 'accept' the issue. In short, Carmines and Stimson provide a theoretical framework that maps out the evolution of issue publics as being contingent on three steps (1986): first, there

is a critical step; second, that critical step leads to a partisan construct that enables elite polarization and third, after a delay, the issue reaches the mass electorate.

This paper traces and tests this theory against two cases in the context of political support for the outer space sector: the historical case of the Sputnik/Apollo period in the United States and the current case of Romania. The first case is selected because it appears, at first glance, to fit the theory that Carmines and Stimson propose and it also reflects one of the largest sudden acceptances and funding of an issue public in history. The second case is selected for two reasons: Romania has a history of sustained interest and investment in the Outer Space sector and it also affected by what may be a 'critical moment' for certain Eastern European countries with regards to the Outer Space sector – the use of the Starlink satellite system to alter the dynamics of the Ukraine War.

Outer Space as an American Issue Public in the Sputnik/Apollo Period

The American experience of Outer Space as an Issue Public has its origins in the 1960's Space Race and the Apollo Program. That experience, on the surface, appears to be one of sustained public support and broad political appeal. However, if we look more deeply at this period from the perspective of issue evolution and issue publics, a different picture emerges.

One of the primary reasons for this stems from the complexity of 'Outer Space' itself, from the perspective of the mass electorate. Unless an individual happened to be in a specific congressional or electoral district that was receiving funding directly linked to NASA (such as the district near Houston where the Johnson Space Center is located), it would be hard to understand the relationship between policy, federal funding and individual benefit. One study on issue publics and space policy found this correlation to be true, but weak. "When NASA provided a direct benefit to a local constituency, public opinion towards the agency shifted slightly in its favor." (Steinberg, 2013) That weak benefit is also almost invisible for the mass electorate. That invisibility can be best understood if we look at regional variations in support for space policy in the United States. "Analysis shows that despite NASA's heavy presence in the South, individuals in the South are significantly less likely to support increased funding for space exploration." (Cobb, 2020) If the most significant physical evidence of the benefit of investment in Outer Space does not affect an issue public, it tells us something about the complexity of that issue and the general difficulty that a mass electorate has in framing their decision-making process through the lens of that issue.

Unlike other issue publics, such as highways, rail service or healthcare, Outer Space does not generally have a specific, visible and easily delineated impact on the community. Further, "The public is not very knowledgeable about the details of the space program, especially when it comes to NASA spending. [...] Many people believe money could be better spent on other governmental programs." (Steinberg, 2013) There are two dimensions of complexity when it comes to NASA (the public face of the American Outer Space sector) – the first is that the programs themselves are often quite complex and require significant context for a mass electorate to understand the relationship between those programs and their day-to-day lives. At the same time, "Under the assumption that NASA's budget is quite high, people might naturally believe spending should be lower and vice versa. Voters, then, must overcome two issues in establishing a preference on NASA spending: lack of knowledge and lack of salience." (Cobb, 2020) This secondary issue, lack of salience, is, in essence, the outcome of the fact that, to the mass electorate, much of the work of NASA exists in a kind of conceptual black box. Inputs and outputs can be understood (money in, rockets out), but the fundamental mechanics of how that happens are largely hidden from view or obscured by their very real scientific complexity. This is readily acknowledged by a number of studies into space policy issue publics. "It is regularly recognized that NASA and space exploration is not a routinely salient policy for the general public. As such, few consistent, long-term sources of information regarding public opinion on NASA exist." (Cobb, 2020)

The problem with lack of salience is that it produces contradictory positions within a mass electorate. This is different than polar partisan differences in a political elite. As but one example, "Launius finds that even though opinion data from the 1960s demonstrate that the public was not completely supportive of the Apollo program, Americans have consistently given NASA high confidence and approval ratings." (Cobb, 2020) This finding, high public support and approval ratings for NASA, combined with an opinion that its budget is too high, is fairly consistent, even during the high point of the Apollo Program. As one of the researchers points out, "Most people are not willing to support increased spending, regardless of their positive feelings towards the agency. Perhaps ironically by comparison, many people do support increased spending for the military, despite displeasure with current military policy." (Steinberg, 2013) The reason is simple: military spending is a highly salient issue public, because a mass electorate can see and be affected by the work of the military,

whether in the form of foreign aggression projected through national media or in the form of soldiers going to and returning from theaters of war.

This issue of salience appears to be a hidden factor when it comes to issue evolution. It is not hidden in the sense that it is invisible to researchers – rather, hidden in the sense that it only appears in certain kinds of situations where there is considerable complexity in a certain political dynamic or system. “Wlezien’s finding about the role of salience is important. If people are not aware of policy outputs, whether from ignorance or lack of information, it will be more difficult to take a position on policy spending or responses to survey questions will be inconsistent.” (Cobb, 2020) Outer Space, as a broad political and technological issue, lacks salience not because a public is ignorant or lacks information. Rather, the lack of salience is due to the fact that even with significant information, the reasons for specific aspects of policy implementation or budgeting may not be understood except by a small elite of experts. In this regard, space policy suffers much of the same fate that nuclear energy policy or nuclear fusion research policy faces – a lack of salience appears to be a persistent feature of incredibly technically complex systems.

There is an important distinction that must be made here between the normative definition of salience, and its more nuanced definition as evident by the cases described here. “The word originally was used by voting behavior scholars to designate the importance individual voters attach to different issues when evaluating political candidates.” (Wlezien, 2005) However, a better way of understanding the concept is that it is more than importance – it is importance derived from understanding. While that distinction may not matter with issues that are both evident to a mass electorate and fairly straightforward (such as gun rights), it does matter as a mass electorate is asked to become increasingly engaged in policy and fiscal political projects that require a more nuanced understanding of internal differences in order to become successful or functional. This is true in areas such as high-speed rail projects and funding and it is also true in long-term Outer Space research, such as lunar colonization or manned exploration of Mars. In these cases, success or failure can rest on highly complex systems and on decision-making processes that are beyond the sphere of public political processes.

We do not ask voters to choose mission critical system technologies for a lunar rover. We do not ask them to choose between competing approaches to commercializing nuclear fusion. But we do ask them to choose between issues that are immediately accessible and

meaningful to them. These primary issues retain a type of salience that is self-evident. They are primary policy areas that directly affect, and are directly understood, by a mass electorate without a need for introducing complexity into political rhetoric and/or political processes. "When it comes to secondary policy areas like space exploration, questions are simply not asked consistently enough. [...] Secondary policy areas often are at a public polling disadvantage." (Cobb, 2015) These secondary policy areas, the domain of complex systems and technologies, are not just missing from the 'issue space' of the mass electorate; data about the relationship between issue publics and these issues is also missing.

Few studies have been done to identify ways of either increasing salience or more consistently identifying voter blocs that coalesce into issue publics in space policy. However, one study stands out. "Using data from the General Social Survey (GSS) over the last 40 years, Wendy Whitman Cobb found that the "issue public" for space policy is identified as "younger, Republican, well-educated, high-socioeconomic status males." (Steinberg, 2013) That is the only study that this author has found that correlates the space sector with an issue public linked to a specific voter demographic.

There is, in addition, a difference here between mass public support for a specific institution, such as NASA, and a true issue public that correlates the absence or presence of support to specific policy, political or fiscal work. In other words, a space policy issue public is one that makes voter decisions on the basis of variances in space policy with respect to specific political actors. This is quite different from general support of space programs de-linked from personal actions such as voting. "An historical analysis of U.S. public opinion on space-related issues presents some valuable results. Support for space funding has remained remarkably stable at approximately 80% since 1965, with only one significant dip in support in the early 1970s." (Roy, et al., 2000) However, that same mass electorate in favor of the U.S. Space program has also almost always been against funding NASA. "Polls in the 1960s also consistently ranked spaceflight near the top of those programs to be cut in the federal budget. Most Americans seemingly preferred doing something about air and water pollution, job training for unskilled workers, national beautification, and poverty before spending federal funds on human spaceflight." (Launius, 2003) It should come as no surprise that the issues that have salience and evolve into issue publics are also those that are tactile and immediately relevant to the life of their political constituents.

This contradiction best sums up the overall issue with applying the standard model of issue evolution to the case of highly technical complex public systems. Asymmetries between public enthusiasm and voter behaviour are generally the result of lack of salience, which directly affects the capacity for issue publics to arise and sustain themselves over national election campaign cycles.

Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in the Apollo program and the way in which that program was framed as an issue public. The first step that is necessary for an issue public to occur is a 'critical moment'. It is commonly assumed that the critical moment in question is, of course, the launch, by the Soviet Union, of the Sputnik Satellite in October, 1957. However, that 'critical moment' did not lead to an elite polarization that was partisan in nature. Sputnik did not result in Republicans and Democrats establishing different policy positions to their respective public and then advocating for those positions as a way to influence voter behaviour. Rather, Sputnik was a critical moment within the non-elected Federal government. The elite polarization that occurred was not partisan along party lines. It was split along internal lines between the respective groups working on rocket development. At its most elemental, Sputnik revealed an elite polarization between the Von Braun group and the choice by President Eisenhower to use the Vanguard rocket system (which failed). "The selection of Vanguard, made by secret committee, still rankle[d] the Von Braun team members." (Osborne, 2009) The transition from 'critical moment' to relative issue salience only occurred after the speech by President John F. Kennedy at Rice University in Texas on September 12, 1962, where Kennedy proclaimed the intention of the presidential administration to back funding and development of an Apollo program that would culminate in a lunar landing by the end of the 1960's. Although Kennedy did publicly mention the idea of a moon landing earlier, it is the specific political rhetoric of the Rice University address that stands out. It is characterized by a three strategies: "A characterization of space as a beckoning frontier; an articulation of time that locates the endeavour within a historical moment of urgency and plausibility; and a final, cumulative strategy that invites audience members to live up to their pioneering heritage by going to the moon." (Jordan, 2003) Since that speech was a political act by the president that had both national and international dimensions (it fundamentally altered the terms of the 'space race' against the Soviet Union), it can be seen as an example of elite political polarization following a critical moment. In other words, after the speech, politicians could frame their positions, as the political elite, as

being for or against the Apollo program specifically. More specifically, Kennedy's language in both speeches provided the political elite with a discursive toolkit for elite positioning. During the the second State of the Union message, on May 25, 196, Kennedy said, "I believe that this Nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth. . . . But in a very real sense, it will not be one man going to the moon—it will be an entire nation. For all of us must work to put him there." (Watanabe, 2009) The President had framed the context of US space politics around a single, specific and understandable objective for the mass electorate and now that electorate could 'take a position' and decide if they were for or against a moon landing. What we see, in fact, play out over the 1960's is that this becomes the issue public.

Gisler & Sornette argue that, "the Apollo program developed as a bubble, first nucleated and engineered by a special interest group, which inflated to a very large size only through the general positive feedback mechanisms discussed in the introduction that are usually associated with bubbles." (Gisler & Sornette, 2009) This bubble was initially led by a very small special interest group, but, as funding for NASA expanded exponentially, the bubble came to include a significant portion of US GDP. "Many people believe that Project Apollo was popular, probably because it garnered significant media attention, but the polls do not support a contention that Americans embraced the lunar landing mission." (Launius, 2003) Rather, up until the actual landing itself, most Americans were against spending such large amounts of money on the space program. "Consistently throughout the 1960s a majority of Americans did not believe Apollo was worth the cost, with the one exception to this a poll taken at the time of the Apollo 11 lunar landing in July 1969." (Launius, 2003) This is consistent with the fact that, despite elite support, the complexity of the Apollo Program was largely beyond the understanding of a mass electorate. They did not see the relationship between program spending and technological advancement in the US economy, and they did not recognize the fact that all of that spending 'in space' was actually happening on the ground and in their neighborhoods as a result of tens of thousands of young people working directly, or indirectly, for the Apollo program. "Apollo inspired; it fostered an "imagination capital." This capital was leveraged for political prestige and leadership, [and] federal and industrial investments in research and development (R&D)." (Sadeh, 2006) Despite these massive investments, it does not appear, however, that the space race became an issue public for the mass electorate.

The reason is not because there was not broad political support for the Apollo program (there was). It is that the Apollo program was not shown to be a determinative issue in voter behavior. Put simply, candidates were neither supported nor denied support because of their position about the Apollo program. Instead, the Apollo program as an issue public persisted in a unique 'political space' – it was significantly overshadowed through the mid-1960's by the of civil rights. In addition, the Apollo program was largely funded by a seemingly contradictory fact: as vice-president Lyndon Johnson was a significantly stronger advocate for the Apollo Program than President Kennedy, but, Kennedy's assassination gave Johnson tremendous political leverage to push through programs in the 'name' of Kennedy. "Observing some of the most powerful people endorse the idea of a space program made it easier for the rest to follow." (Gisler & Sornette, 2009) The fact that the Apollo program was the product of two critical moments (Sputnik and the Rice University speech) and polarized a broad political elite means that it should have been an issue public.

The problem we face, however, is that it did not behave like an issue public. Rather, it behaved more like a program of mass fanatical support, independent of individual voter evaluation. As such, it was more like WWII and the Manhattan Project – a program presented to the mass electorate by a visibly unified elite. Even if there were variations within the elite, those variations were largely hidden from the broader public view. While "Around 75% of the American public generally approve of the job that NASA is doing." (Roy, et al., 2000) NASA does not rise to an issue public. Voters do not choose political candidates on the basis of their position towards NASA.

Although the Outer Space sector enjoys broad public support in the United States, I would argue that it has never actually been an issue public, because it has never become a specific reason to influence voter behavior of the mass electorate. While, "trust in scientists and researchers as an informational authority is very high," (Melamed, et al., 20023) and may explain part of the 'outsourcing' of issue complexity by the American mass electorate, that electorate has also always seen Outer Space as both complex and lacking salience. Many political scientists would argue that, "Politics has always been at the heart of mankind's exploration and utilization of space." (Minenor-Matheson, 2023) However, what they are referring to is principally a politics of international relations and political power in the World, as opposed to an internal politics of voter behavior. As such, the construct of an issue public

remains difficult to place in the context of issues that are both highly complex and lack salience.

Outer Space as an Issue Public in Romania

Romania has not had a 'sputnik' moment in its outer space history, nor is it seen as a 'space power'. Rather, what makes it useful for purposes of comparison is that many of the same dynamics that occurred during the Apollo program are also occurring in Romania today. Romania has an active Outer Space agency. It is one of the first countries to sign the Artemis Accords with NASA and the United States. Components of a robotic arm it developed are on its way to Mars. It has had a sustained interest in Outer Space for decades and it has an active program of commercial and government cooperation with major global Aerospace corporations, such as Lockheed Martin. Despite the fact that Outer Space, could in theory, be a major accelerator of innovation and economic development, it remains, however, a largely absent issue public. Why is this the case? And in what ways are the some of the same factors present with the mass electorate in both the United States and Romania? In order to answer this question, I will first provide some background about the context of the Romanian Outer Space sector and I will then look at media reporting in Romania about the Outer Space Sector to examine whether or not Outer Space is present as an issue public.

Background of the Romanian Space Sector

The context and evolution of Romanian Outer Space work and policy has several distinct dimensions, each of which must be first be addressed. Those are: the historic interest in Outer Space in Romania, the relationship between the Romanian state and the European Space Agency and the broad place of the Outer Space sector in the Romanian 'public sphere' of politics and political media.

To understand what makes Romania such a peculiar outlier, it is worth pointing out some basic facts about the current Romanian Space Sector. Romania has an active government space agency – ROSA – started in 1991 immediately after the collapse of communism and Romania and has been a member of the ESA (European Space Agency) since 2011. (Piso, et al., 2008) Romania has a history of pioneers in space, including the Cosmonaut Dumitru Prunaria, who was a member of the Soviet Soyuz 40 mission in 1981. In

2022, Romania signed the Artemis Accords with the United States in order to establish a common framework for lunar exploration and colonization. (Piso, et al., 2008).

In addition, Romania has a uniquely long history of interest in Outer Space technology. Conrad Haas, a Romanian visionary, was one of the first humans to conceptualize and design a multi-stage rocket in 1529. Henri Coanda was one of the designers of the first jet engine and jet airplane in 1910. And, of course, Hermann Oberth, one of the most famous early rockets scientists, came from Romania. (Piso, et al., 2008) At the current time, ROSA is currently engaged with “more than one hundred organizations with research, academic and industrial profiles.” (Piso, et al., 2008)

At the current time, Romania is actively engaged building satellites, hosting major space conferences and international space events. ROSA’s budget is \$8 Million. By comparison, “The data show NASA’s total economic output in 2019 was \$64.3 billion and supported over 312,000 jobs. Additionally, space-related production was found to represent 0.5 percent of US gross domestic product in 2018.” (Highfill, 2022) However, that small budget does not take into account Romania’s population and GDP. When factored in, Romania spends as much on space as do other members states in the ESA.

While Romania has been a partner of the ESA for a number of years, recent work of the ESA itself is particularly relevant in understanding issue evolution of Outer Space in Europe. The European Space Agency released a report in 2023 entitled ‘Revolution Space’. Written by their high-level advisory group on human and robotic space exploration for Europe, the report highlighted the significant gap that Europe is facing when it comes to both investment and fundamental R&D in developing capacity to access and commercialize outer space. As but one example, the report highlighted the fact that, “More than 100 lunar missions have been announced by 2030, both by established and emerging space actors. At present, Europe is only leading two of them.” (HLAG, 2023) The report further points out certain structural deficits to European outer space investment and development. For example, “In the past 30 years, Europe decided not to invest in leadership and autonomy in human space exploration. Instead, it chose to pursue collaboration as a junior partner with NASA and, until a year ago, with Russia.” (HLAG, 2023) This report matters because it highlights a fundamental problem that is true for Europe – and for Romania – outer space is not an issue public. European politicians do not win or run on campaigns that include outer space. Outer space is not a reason for voters to identify with one party or another. Instead,

the primary issue publics in Europe are migration, borders, the Ukraine war, being Euro-centric or not Euro-centric, nationalism, etc. These are issue publics because these are the issues that affect voter behavior and that result in partisan differences among a political elite. Scholars argue that "Space could significantly contribute to the creation of a European identity." (Hornung, 2010) However, that identify is only possible if a mass electorate realizes that, "Space, with its numerous applications, has become an integral part of everyday life, including arts, exploration, security, defence and the economy." (Hornung, 2010) While significant functionally, that integration is invisible to the majority of European voters. When it does appear in public, it can feel almost out of place. In a recent speech by the President of Romania to the European Parliament, that glaring disconnect was made quite clear. He said, "Everywhere in Romania, from Iași to Timișoara, from Cluj to Bucharest, from Craiova to Constanța, thousands of skilled Romanian engineers – women and men – work to advance digital technologies, be they connected machines and intelligent transportation systems, 5G telecommunications and the Internet of Things, research and innovation in the blockchain space, space technologies or digital agriculture." (Iohannis, 2018) The economic reality does not reflect the perceived political reality. While outer space remains an invisible issue public in most of Europe and Romania, significant investments in the sector are being made on a continuous basis. "Lockheed Martin has been involved in various projects in Romania for 25 years." (Banila, 2022) And yet, if the average Romanian citizen is asked (I personally spoke with a number of Romanian citizens) they are barely aware of the fact that Romania has an Outer Space agency.

Events that could, in theory, serve as critical moments to ignite a political debate about the role of Outer Space in Romania have, so far, failed to do so. The most important recent event of such nature was the affect of Elon Musk's Starlink System on the war in Ukraine. "Musk's Starlink — based on a cluster of table-sized satellites flying as low as 130 miles above Ukraine and beaming down high-speed internet access — has become an unexpected lifeline to the country, both on the battlefield and in the war for public opinion." (Frackiewicz, 2023) However, this event has received almost no local coverage as a part of national politics. Where it is mentioned, it is primarily to demonstrate the effectiveness of Starlink over Russia countermeasures. For example, the Deputy Secretary General of NATO (A Romanian national) proclaimed, "We have witnessed how disruptive counter space assets can be, within an hour of Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, the ViaSat satellite was forced

offline, affecting communications for Ukraine's police, military, intelligence services and for the economy.” (Geoană, 2023) The issue of Starlink is seen as a competition in space between Russia and the United States, but not as a reason to alter the political and economic climate of investment in Outer Space technology in Romania. This is despite the fact that Romania, “launched a new initiative called the Defense Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic, DIANA. Romania hosts two DIANA test centers, including one the International Center of Excellence in artificial intelligence, the very Politehnica University.” (Geoană, 2023) Both of these centers are aimed at developing Romanian-based technologies to be used in Outer Space. However, Geoană is speaking, here, politically, for NATO and not for Romania. And, the context of Starlink is linked to a broader geopolitical issue of the militarization of space assets.

In nearly every instance where a major event occurs that involves outer space, that event tends to be depicted as apart of a global space race triad (US, Russia, China) or depicted as part of a scientific program. Outer Space appears to exist as a kind of rhetorical contradiction in the Romanian public sphere – continuously present and yet, largely invisible. If we look more closely at how the issue is presented in national media, we may be able to further understand this invisibility.

Is Outer Space an Issue Public in Romanian Politics?

The research shows that Romania is an active member of the ESA and is also consistently interested in development of Outer Space technology. However, the activities of ROSA and the continued work of Romanian Outer Space scientists does not necessarily correlate to outer space being an issue public in Romanian national space politics.

This study conducts a preliminary survey of English and Romanian language news platforms that represent the larger news media platforms in the country. The key phrase ‘outer space’ was searched in both English and Romanian and the results were individually analyzed for content related to the intersection of both Outer Space and Romanian Politics.

The following are the results of this initial survey.

First, the English language news site ‘Romania Insider’ has a total of 7 articles related to Outer Space. Only one of the articles deal with political or economic issues of Outer Space – an article about Romania repaying a debt to the European Space Agency.

Second, Romania Journal (Romaniajournal.ro) another English language news media site has a total of 32 articles that mention outer space going back to the year 2015. Of those articles, one mentions the signing of the Artemis Accords with the United States under the category of 'science & curiosities' news. There are several news items about Dumitru Prunariu, the first Romanian Cosmonaut and a mention of the first satellite made in the Republic of Moldova being launched into Outer Space. There are no articles in 8 years about politics and space policy.

Third, The Romanian Language primary news web site EVZ (<https://evz.org>) mentions outer space in 200 separate article posts over 9 years. This is a large national sensationalist website. The articles are primarily about interesting scientific facts about space. Only ten articles of the 200 are about space politics, and they are focused exclusively on sensationalist reporting about the new space race between Russia, China and the United States. Essentially, they are international political news pieces about different aspects of military and civilian programs for space conquest.

Fourth, the Romanian Language primary news platform Bursa (www.bursa.ro) has a total of 45 articles about Outer Space. A small number of articles address the issue of Russian and American militarization of space. There is only one article in over ten years that addresses outer space in the context of Romanian politics and economics. It covers the address of NATO's deputy general secretary, Mircea Geoana, where he states that [in the context of Romania], "Space assets are not only essential to our lifestyles, securing everything from mobile phones to banking and weather forecasting, but are also essential to military operations, to navigate, track forces and gather intelligence and detect launches of missiles" (Geoană, 2023).

Fifth, the Romanian Language platform Gandul (www.gandul.ro) mentions, over the course of ten years, outer space in 197 article posts. Of these posts, only ten articles deals with issues tangentially or directly related to the Romanian Outer Space sector. Of these ten, one addresses the role of NATO and Romania in the context of Outer Space technological development and another addresses the political and economic context of investment in Outer Space technology. In that article, the head of the Romanian Space Agency (ROSA) Marius-Ioan Piso, describes "how much Romania invests in the space field, at what "table" our country plays in this field, and when we will have a new "Dumitru Prunariu". (<https://www.gandul.ro/stiri/seful-agentiei-spatiale-romane-face-anuntul-la-asaltul->

planetei-marte-este-posibil-sa-participam-si-noi-18154254) This is the only article on Gandul that directly looks at the question of Romanian political investment in Outer Space in ten years.

Sixth, the Romanian Language platform Cotidianul (www.cotidianul.ro) mentions outer space approximately 300 times over the course of 14 years. Only six articles tangentially or directly discuss Romania in Outer Space. One of the articles, in particular, is the only article to discuss the political dimension of Romanian space politics, claiming that it has been 'pulled to the right'.

Seventh, the Romanian Language news platform Jurnalul (<https://jurnalul.ro>) mentions outer space in 273 articles over 18 years. The politics of Romanian Outer Space development are only mentioned in one article about a Romanian space race.

Conclusion

There appears to be a failure of issue salience when it comes to Outer space and Romanian National politics. That failure of issue salience is not a surprise, since a similar failure of issue salience occurred in the United States during a period of tremendous public support for the space program. What is interesting to note is that Outer Space is often mentioned in Romanian media and is part of the Romanian public sphere. However, it is present through two primary "modalities" – either as a part of pure scientific work or as a manifestation of the afore-mentioned space race triad (US vs. Russia and China).

These two modalities have something in common – both of them discursively construct Romania as 'reactive' to Outer Space technological development in the world and not an equal actor on that stage. Initially, this may be perceived as a reflection of the smallness of the Romanian Outer Space Sector in absolute terms. However, the sector is quite small in the United States as well, when compared to other sectors and that fact is not acknowledged in Romanian politics. If we look past the relative comparisons, it appears that the Romanian politicians do not yet see Outer Space as being an issue of political advantage, either with political or other elites. At the same time, elites have not yet determined a rational link that leads to partisan divide and, by default, partisan advantage, for the mass electorate in the context of Outer Space.

Why is not outer space an 'issue public'? This is actually a very difficult question to answer. The theory proposed by Carmines and Stimson presumes a step-wise progression that culminates in the evolution of an issue public. That step-wise progression is clearly evident in the case of the Apollo program. It is also partially evident in the case of the ESA report and the response to the use of Starlink in the current war in Ukraine. There is clear support for the space industry in Romania, and significant room for international partnerships contributing to a broader type of 'aerospace diplomacy'. Yet, the issue, in all situations, does not rise to that of a contested 'issue public'. The closest analogue to an issue public would be if funding for outer space technology development devolved into a mandatory binary and politicians could stake a campaign position on that binary. In other words, if outer space technology development was only possible by cutting or significantly reducing the existing health insurance market exchange system in the United States set up through the affordable care act. A politician would have to be able to run on the issue of "health not space" or "space not health".

There appears to be a missing factor in the Carmines and Stimson model – the contingency of a resource binary or ethical binary. In other words, all issue publics, upon reaching a mass electorate, must be able to be framed in a functional and simple binary: it's either X or Y. And, if we examine those issue publics that have retained coherence through multiple election cycles, we see exactly that conditionality at stake. Abortion is an ethical binary. Welfare is a resource binary. Gun rights are an ethical binary. In other words, issue publics can only form when there is a binary that supports strong elite contra-positions.

Outer Space, even during the widely popular Apollo program, could not be constructed by political elites as an issue binary. At the surface, the reason appears to be linked to the complexity of outer space technologies and the lack of issue salience for the mass electorate. There is, however, a second dimension at stake here as well – an issue binary requires an issue to be one that affects the moral choice of an ordinary voter/ constituent. A voter/ constituent must be able to change their political behavior as a result of that moral choice.

As such, it appears that there are two criteria necessary for an issue to rise to an issue public, independent of the issue evolution model proposed by Carmines and Stimson. The first criteria is that the issue must be coherent enough for the mass electorate to acquire issue salience. It must be understandable. The second criteria is that the issue must be presentable

as an ethical or resource binary. Reaching that point requires a sufficient percent of the mass electorate being directly affected by the issue in order for resource or ethical use issues to matter.

Outer Space appears to be a highly complex domain when it comes to issue evolution and issue publics. In two extreme situations, similar dynamics of poor issue salience occur, and similar issues of issue invisibility are present – even during periods of tremendous public support for Outer Space, such as during the Apollo Program. While the Carmines and Stimson model posits that issue evolution requires a ‘critical moment’ in order for it be accepted by elites, it appears to be limited to historical issues that are clear resource and/or ethical binaries. More research into the application of the Carmines and Stimson model in cases of complex technological political sectors appears to be necessary in order to better understand the dynamics of issue evolution.

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